

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 180

Short is the sweet epistle of Philemon that has been read this morning. But though short, it yields long-running clues to very vast matters; and though written to a man long dead, it is found to have a bearing on many who are alive at this day. The clues it supplies take us into the presence of important facts that are beyond our personal cognisance, but about which we are enabled, by its means, to have as much positiveness of conviction as if we had seen them. It might be likened to the conclusions a man is justified in drawing, who picks up a piece of written paper somewhere with writing on it. There is quite a number of positive conclusions that he would be able to come to if he were of a thinking turn. There is first the paper. Paper is made: it does not grow. Therefore, though he never saw the mill where it was produced, he would say "There is, or has been, a paper mill somewhere." Next, there is the writing on it: it is proof of the existence of the art of writing, which may not seem much of a conclusion in our familiarity with that art, but which might, in certain circumstances, be a very weighty conclusion. Next, the making of those marks proves the employment of some kind of a darkening element with some kind of a marking instrument. It proves the ink and the pen, and it proves the holder of the pen, for pens do not write of themselves. The finder of the piece of paper would be as certain that a living man had held that pen as if he had seen him; and though he had never seen him, he would be positive that being a living man, he breathed and had lungs and a heart, and the various other vital organs of a living body. And all these conclusions he would be justified in entertaining as positive convictions about which there could not be the least doubt, though they were but deductions from the finding of a small piece of paper on the ground.

Now in this epistle to Philemon, we have, as it were, a small piece of paper from which, if we rightly reason, we shall be able to draw equally positive conclusions on vastly more important matters. We take the very first word in it—"Paul." To what does this lead? We ask, who was Paul? If we had nothing but the piece of paper, we might not be able to know. But the piece of paper gives us the question: and it sets us on the path to find the answer. We apply at the accessible sources of information. We ask "Is anything known of Paul, the writer of the letter to Philemon?" We get our answer as distinctly and as reliably as if we asked who Napoleon was; who Alexander was; who Homer was. By what is called "the consensus" of all the sources and forms of testimony in the case, we learn that Paul was an active traveller, and preacher and agitator of the first century. We ask why he travelled, what he preached, what he agitated about? The statement of Festus sums up all we can learn.

*"Concerning one Jesus who was dead, **whom Paul affirmed to be alive.**"*

Was he always of this mind? No: at first he aimed to destroy the faith he afterwards preached. What led him to change his mind? Evidence that the Christians whom he persecuted were in the right. What sort of evidence? Conclusive argument? No: the evidence of his senses: he saw Christ: and seeing is believing. But why should change of belief set him a-travelling? It did not do so. He took to travelling because Christ commanded him to do so, telling him it was for this very purpose he had appeared unto him, that he might make him a witness and a preacher and an apostle. And as a matter of fact he did travel and preach extensively, and produce conviction in many minds, and among others in the mind of Philemon to whom this letter is addressed. Thus we become as certain of the reality and activity and faithfulness of Paul as if we had lived in the first century, and witnessed his proceedings: and this brings with it a personal application of moment to us all: for that which in Paul's preaching concerned Philemon and many others in that day concerns us, viz., that—

“God hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained, whereof he hath given assurance unto all men in that he hath raised him from the dead.”

So much for the first word in this piece of paper—“*Paul*.” Now for the second: “*a prisoner*.” Paul a **prisoner**! See where this leads. Why did Paul describe himself as a prisoner? It is the worst thing a man could say of himself in ordinary circumstances. If you hear that a man otherwise favourably introduced to you has been in prison, what is the effect but to produce a strong feeling of painful surmise and aversion? Your suspicion is stirred: your antipathy excited. You feel as if you don’t want to have anything to do with such a person. Explanation may alter the feeling; but that is the first feeling produced. Why did Paul call himself a prisoner? Because he was a prisoner. He was often a prisoner, as he said elsewhere: “*in prisons frequent*” “*suffering bonds as an evil doer*.” He foresaw it would be so, as he said in his farewell speech to the Ephesians:

*“And now behold I go bound in the Spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there save that the Holy Spirit witnesseth in every city that **bonds and afflictions abide me**”* (Acts 20:22).

What was the cause of these bonds and afflictions? Christ himself stated the cause in the communication he made to Ananias at the time of Paul’s being chosen:

*“I will show him how great things he must suffer **for my name’s sake**.”*

It was his testimony for Christ that led to his acquaintance with the inside of prisons. Hence he styles himself in this letter to Philemon as “*the prisoner of Jesus Christ*,” and says to Timothy,

*“Be not thou ashamed **of the testimony** of our Lord nor of **me his prisoner**”* (2 Tim. 1:8).

What was the “*testimony*” in the case? Was it a mere argument in favour of the principles of Christ? Was it a mere formulation of the evidences of proof of Christ’s resurrection? Nay, it was “*testimony*” in the primary sense of the term: the evidence of those who had seen what they spoke of: the testimony of **eye-witness**.

*“We have not followed cunningly devised fables when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were **EYE WITNESSES** of his majesty;”*

So said Peter; and so in affect said Paul;

*“Last of all, he was **SEEN** of (by) **ME ALSO**”* (1 Cor. 15:8);

*“Have not I **SEEN** Jesus Christ our Lord”* (1 Cor. 9:1).

*“The God of our fathers hath chosen thee (Paul) that thou shouldest . . . see that **Just One** and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth, for thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou hast **SEEN** and **HEARD**”* (Acts 22:14).

For declaring what he personally knew to be a fact, namely, that Christ was alive, —Paul was “*a prisoner*.” We have to consider whether this does not prove the truth of his declaration. Who goes to prison for a lie? Who carries on an imposture that brings no benefit, but lands a man in constant “*bonds and afflictions*”? Such a thing is contrary to the universal habit and practice of men. Perseverance in a declaration that brings evil and not good never yet sprang from any cause but sincere conviction. Paul was convinced he had seen Christ; it wants but one step more: “*therefore he saw Christ*.” This might not follow in any case: but it follows in

Paul's case with peculiar force from Paul's own character, from the circumstances under which he saw Christ, and from the activity and the success of the other apostles before him, whose word he sought in vain to arrest and destroy.

Look at these points briefly, one by one, first, Paul's letters and speeches are evidence of Paul's intellectual lucidity. He shows great discrimination between facts and impressions; evinces subtle and incisive power to appreciate the bearings of involved matters, and a pre-eminent disposition to follow truth with faithful docility. If the robustness of mind required for the production of Paul's letters—(this reasoning is apart from the cooperation of inspiration)—if the mental force required for such an authorship cannot be trusted with regard to the sight of the eyes, it is clear that no man can be trusted, and that such a thing as trustworthy evidence is impossible. But this is contrary to all experience; every man whose honesty is proved can be trusted, and is trusted every day, with regard to affairs of eye-sight: and trustworthy evidence is a matter of everyday occurrence and acceptance. Second, the circumstances under which Paul saw Christ yield another guarantee that he really did so, and did not merely think he did so. It was in the presence of a large group of witnesses who had no favour to Christ; it was in the open day; it affected them all in a physical manner, throwing them all to the ground; and it left its special mark on Paul who was struck blind, and had to finish the journey without his eyesight, by the leading of others who guided him by the hand. In addition to this, they all heard the voice that addressed Paul in Hebrew in the midst of the brightness that dazzled him. Thirdly, the events preceding Paul's journey to Damascus lend a powerful confirmation in the same direction. What took him there? The activity of the Christians. To what was that activity due? To the persistent public testimony of the twelve apostles and their assistants. What was the nature of that testimony? Personal testimony—the testimony of personal knowledge—the declaration of their individual knowledge that Christ had risen based upon precisely the same order of experience by which any man knows that any man is alive—seeing him, hearing him, feeling him, conversing with him during a period of time spread over several weeks. The fact of Christ being alive was established by every rule of evidence before Paul came on the scene, and quite independently of his own interview with Christ near Damascus. Consequently his testimony, though strong enough in itself to entitle it to be received on its own merits, has a powerful substratum of pre-attested facts that places it beyond all doubt in the judicial weighing of evidence.

Where then do these words "*Paul a prisoner*" land us? They land us in the conviction of Christ having risen, and of his therefore being now alive, and therefore of his having destiny in his hand. They land us in the presence of Christ at this moment; for when we consider what is involved, Christ living means Christ near every one of us. In him dwells all the power of God to know and to see and to do. His message to the seven Asian ecclesias shows him "*walking in the midst of the ecclesias*" and discerning the thoughts and intents of the heart, and causing every one to find according to his own way. Therefore we have a light brought into our life and a Providence into our ways, and a power into our motives that men lack who have no faith in Christ's resurrection. True, we walk by faith, and not by sight, and therefore not so easily as if we stood related to things we could see. Still, when faith has attested facts to work on, it acquires wonderful strength, even power enough to lead a man to lay down his life if need be.

If we are guided thus far by the words "*Paul a prisoner*," what shall we say to the next three words: "*of Jesus Christ?*" We look round and ask, Is anything known of Jesus Christ? We discover at once that it is not a name of yesterday. It is a name in all books of any time for 1,800 years past. It is a name of the first century. Our piece of paper takes us right away to that time at a stride. The epistle to Philemon was written 1,800 years ago. Of that there is no manner of doubt with whatever wonderful degree of success some may have

reasoned themselves into a fog on the subject. Hence we may disengage ourselves from our own day with all its dreary oppressive surroundings, and fly in imagination right away back to the first century, and there ask our question: Who was Jesus Christ? And what a plain and what a wonderful answer we get when we obtain all the accessible information. Jesus Christ we learn has been recently crucified. We ask the populace, Why? They say, because he was a deceiver of the people. Others say, "Nay, he was a good man who was hated by our rulers because he found fault with their ways." Others say, "He was more than a good man: he was a wonderful man; and such as we never heard of before." We ask, "What was wonderful about him?" They answer: "He cured multitudes of people without medicine." We ask, "Did he cure them in a natural way?" They answer "No: he did nothing but speak the word: and whether it was a palsied arm, a blind eye, a tied tongue, a deaf ear, a shrivelled leg, or raving madness, it was perfectly cured. Nay, more than that, he restored life to the dead. More than that, he could multiply bread at will, and feed thousands with a few loaves. He could walk on the water and not sink: most wonderful of all, he could stop a storm by telling it to stop." We ask, "What became of him after he was crucified?" They answer, "Oh, he was buried: but his disciples say he rose again." Has he disciples? Yes. Where? Everywhere. In this town? Yes. Can you direct us to them? Yes—such and such a place. We go: we ask, "Are ye believers in Jesus Christ?" They answer, "Yes." We ask, "A man who was crucified?" "Yes;" "And who is dead?" "No, he is not dead." "Was he not buried after he was crucified?" "Yes, but he rose again." "How do you know?" "Because we have seen him." "All of you?" "No, not all of us, but some of us." "Which?" "Well, in the first place, there are the apostles, and there are their companions, including several educated intelligent ladies, and there is a large company of about 500 that saw him at one time." "Are there any of these with you?" "Peter is with us." "Can we see him?" "Yes." "Where and when?"—such a place and time. We go: "Are you Peter?" "Yes." "We understand you are a believer in Christ and in fact one of his apostles?" "Yes." "You believe he is alive?" "I do." "Why?" "Because I have seen him." "Seen him?" "Yes, more than once." "Since his crucifixion?" "Since his crucifixion." "There is no mistake about it?" "Impossible." "Why?" "Because others were with me and we ate and drank with him, and talked with him: and this happened on several occasions. It wasn't all on one day, though if it had been all on one day, I could no more have been mistaken than I am about your asking me these questions. It extended over six weeks in all; and then he took his departure from us." "Where did he go?" "He ascended in our sight and disappeared in the sky." "Is such a thing possible?" "All things are possible with God. The man who could walk the sea—I saw him do it—could ascend the air. The man whom God raised from the dead, God could take to himself away from the earth. Besides, that is not all." "What else is there?" "He told us he should send upon us the same power that he had, and that we were to wait in Jerusalem till it came. We did so: and the power came, and we can do the things he did." "Can you heal the diseased and raise the dead?" "We can: and speak in languages we never learnt." "May we see this power put forth by you?" "Certainly." "When?" "Any time you choose to fix." "Now." "Very well: what language shall I speak in?" We mention one. He speaks in it. We recognise it. We mention another. He speaks in that. Then we say, "But about the healing?" "Well, are there any sick?" We go out into the street, and quickly discover some cases of disease in the houses. We return and bring one or two of them. He heals them on the spot. So that they walk out hale and sound men. We propose to bring the others. He says, "You need not trouble. Only tell me of them." We do so. He says, "They are now made whole at this moment: go and see." We go and see, and find it so. We return, and say, "What is the meaning of this?" He says, "The meaning is that Jesus is the Son of God, whom God sent as the propitiation of the sins of the world, whom He raised from the dead in pledge thereof, and through whom He purposes to redeem from sin and death all who believe in Him and obey Him." We ask, "Do you preach him then?" He answers, "Yes, in every city,

the work has been going on for a long time.” “What do the people say to it?” “Some say it is madness. Our rulers say it is blasphemy and try to stop us by persecution.” “Do any believe?” “Thousands.” “Notwithstanding the persecution?” “Yes: they cannot deny the evidence of their senses.” “In the miracles you mean.” “Yes, and we cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard.” “Does the persecution bear very hard?” “Sometimes: but recently there has been a great easement.” “How is that?” “Through a very striking circumstance.” “What was that?” “The man who had charge of the last outburst of persecution himself became a preacher of Christ in the very midst of it.” “How was that?” “Christ appeared to him and made him an apostle.” “You mean Paul.” “The same.” “We have heard of him.” “You should see him.” “We should like.” “You may.”

And Paul himself we should find in the land of the living at that time, and enquiring of him concerning all the circumstances, we should have everything stated by Peter confirmed; and matters perhaps further explained. He would inform us that the meaning of the whole matter was that—

“God who at sundry times and divers manners had spoken in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, had in these last days spoken by a son whom he had appointed heir of all things.”

By this, if we had been ignorant before, we should be introduced to God and his whole revelation and purpose, as disclosed to Moses and all the prophets who came after him.

The epistle to Philemon, followed up in its clues in this simple way, affords to us as much ground for certainty concerning all those things as the supposed bit of paper picked up anywhere with writing on it gives ground for certainty concerning the paper mill and the pen and the ink of the man who wrote it, and his physiological organization. It only requires the exercise of a little strong commonsense to see this: and surely the judgment that can see this will do the rest. It will not stop short with an abstract discernment of facts. It will not be unmoved as if it had discerned nothing. It will not go on as if there had been no Paul, and no Peter, and no wonderful Christ such as they preached. It will surely awake and arise to the glorious facts of the case, and open the heart to the reception of the divine proposals that come by their hands: proposals to have faith in God’s attested purpose in Christ, to yield obedience to the commandments of God: to accept the service of God: to come out and be separate from the world to God: that we may obtain the everlasting life of God at the resurrection that God will perform at the coming of the Son of God to establish the glory of God and set up the Kingdom of God in the earth which belongs to God with the fullness thereof.

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By Bro. Robert Roberts